

Shamrock and sickle

STAT

THE SPRINGING OF GEORGE BLAKE. By Sean Bourke.
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By Hugh Thomas

George Blake was a Soviet agent within the British Secret Service who clearly did a lot of damage to that organization, whether or not it is true (as it is alleged) that he betrayed as many British agents in Russian territory as there were years to his ultimate prison sentence: namely, 42. He also made the British prison service look very foolish when he successfully escaped from Wormwood Scrubs Prison, in West London, after having served only five years of that sentence. The positive thing to come out of the Blake catastrophe seems to have been to discredit the theory that all communist spies can be detected by their homosexuality or drunkenness: Blake lived an impeccably dull life, had no amusing friends to drag down to perdition with him, seemed (even to his wife) an ordinary family man, and had no vices apart from treachery.

Sean Bourke, the author of this book, is the Irishman who successfully engineered Blake's escape. Bourke, after going to Russia with Blake, is now, I understand, still in Ireland successfully avoiding British attempts to extradite him back to face trial for that matter. His story is written in the style of a novel, with much conversation and many vivid descriptions of life both within the prison and in Russia. It certainly does read for once as the publishers claim it to be, a great adventure story. The narrative rattles along at a terrific pace and there are some extremely entertaining passages, particularly those relating to Bourke's last visit to Ireland before the jail break. There is also a hilarious moment when one of the people who sheltered Blake after the escape in a house in Cromwell Road, London, reveals that his wife, who is under analysis, has confessed part of Blake's story to her analyst.

A number of questions admittedly do occur to the reader. First of all, of course, is it all true? Can it be possible that Bourke, who had no connection with the KGB before Blake's escape (and was most unhappy in his relations with them afterwards), carried out the escape by himself, helped by a few Irish friends. The answer seems to be that this is indeed roughly what happened, and the description of the inadequacy of British prison security reads only too realistically. On the other hand, there must be some conversations, some incidents which Bourke (who is nowhere said to have been assisted by a ghost-writer) must have invented or remembered in a somewhat sketchy way. Presumably

the names of his Irish helpers are false—otherwise they would even now be being visited by Scotland Yard.

The second question relates to the author's bona fides: It seems scarcely believable that Bourke, who had been in and out of jail much of his life, would simply have assisted Blake because he liked him when they were in jail together or because he thought the sentence of 42 years was too long. The same doubt arises when we read of the motives of the various Irishmen in London who helped Bourke afterwards in various ways: Two of them, a mysterious pair called Michael and Ann, who are presented as being saintly in the extreme, actually drove Blake all the way to Berlin. Did they just do this because they were Irish, because they hated the English police? None of them, the author is at pains to point out, likes communism at all.

Finally, once in Russia, Bourke quarrels with Blake, who certainly turns out to have been unbelievably ungrateful and mean-spirited. Yet in this often very interesting section of the book Bourke is at pains to insist that his KGB contacts were honorable and decent men doing their best not only in respect of his case but in the country generally, suggesting that the days of Beria are quite a thing of the past. Blake, he says, is still very much stuck in the posture of the old days but the others are new men and relatively enlightened. The reader should take this judgment with a pinch of salt. He should also perhaps view the personality of Larissa, Bourke's interpreter and presumably mistress, in his last days in Russia with a shade more skepticism than the romantic author does. Larissa I am sure, if she was real, was a paid-up member of the KGB.

From the Russian passages of this book, incidentally, something new about the character of Blake is also gained. He swiftly turned from the polite supplicant looking for a friend to help him escape from jail and England into a frightful villain. We are left to assume that Blake did what he did for sheer reasons of personal aggrandizement; Bourke, though he does not tell us so, acted presumably as he did in order finally to prove himself really "one of the boys," (as his mother in Lime-rick would have put it) who managed to point something at the English rather more dangerous than a revolver, so that John Bull would stop "laffen at him in the end."

Hugh Thomas's Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom, 1762-1969 will be published this fall.

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